Comfort Me With Apples

For my family

Shirley Jones

Comfort Me With Apples

Red Hen Press

This is a collection of my poems, prose pieces and translations from Old English and Old Welsh, which have appeared in the artist's books I produced between 1977-2001. Some of the poems have been reproduced in two previous collections:
Out of the Sun and *Pick Me a Bunch of Roses*

For Jenny

"Jenny died last night"
Luc's voice impersonal on the phone.
Through our kitchen window the sun
shines blithely on our silver birches.
Hedges and fields burgeon with new life.
We have brought no unlucky hawthorn
into our house, this May month,
but two deaths have blighted it -
dark memento mori in a bright spring.
My mother was old; Jenny was not.
Laughter bubbled out of her, infectious
like a child's, mirth-loving, heart-warming
as a wood fire in the dead months of winter.
Summer will not come for her again.

May 2001

"Comfort me with apples"
Now in the autumn of my years
Lay up a storehouse against
The deprivations of my final days
For winter is before me
And the cold will surely come.

Hold colours in my mind's eye
Bright remembered
When my sight has faded.

New green of spring, sharp as limes, on hills
Patchworked where the bare earth darns
The ploughed fields rust red in the rain.

Cornflowers peppered with the red and green
Of burnet moths in summer meadows
And poppies blazing in our garden ferns.

And when the green of oak and hawthorn
Change to red and tawny shades
And baked by the sun of summer
The reeds at Llangorse lake turn
Biscuit brown and dry
Then comfort me with the whiteness
Of the swans, and with their gracefulness.

Remember frost on silver birches
And rose-flushed skies of dawns and sunsets
Technicoloured like a Disney film.
Then comfort me with the glow
Of wood fires on a winter's night
When I am old and colder still.

And should my hearing further be impaired
Let me recall the sounds that eased me -

Chapel hymns at a Cymanfa Ganu
Mozart, Mendelssohn and Bach
Pipe and tabor, fiddle. And harp.

The rapt murmurs of children -
Once my own and now my children's children -
Curled against me for a bedtime story.

The sound of silence on fern-filled moors
High on a hill in Powys.

Against a time when my perceptions fail
Let me retain the scents of spring and summer
The fragrance of a golden quince in autumn
Hanging on our garden wall.

Keep fresh the smell of coffee brewing
The taste of bread that's newly baked
The flavour of fruit that's just been picked.

And if my bones are sorely vexed
Let me still find comfort
Caressing my contented cats.

Should these deprivations not come singly
And my storehouse be too grimly bare
Do not you who say you love me
Hinder my departure then.
But let me go, before all grace does,
So your memory of how I once was
May remain intact for you.

Etched in Autumn 1997

Haiku

Fractured light on a lake
A mallard's iridescence
Kaleidoscopic.

Bare hawthorns shivered
In March winds. May wraps them
In snow-like blossom.

Clothes drying on a line
Washtub clouds lather
A Reckit's Blue sky.

Hills ash-grey in morning light
Dark crows scour
The entrails of a dead land.
Utah/Montana/Arizona triangle

My cats sit like bookends
Back to back, their attitude
Easy to read.

Oriental cats and poppies -
Grey smoke snaking
Through vermilion flames.

Delinquent puppy
Banished. Resident felines
Smugly repossess.

Swans at the lake's edge
Sunlight shimmering through reeds
Pale gold on white velvet.

Passing Through

My mother at eighty, standing
Like a child, in the china department
Of a Cardiff store.
No arrangement for us to meet, just
Passing through.
A shock not just at seeing her there
But the shocking lapse in her appearance -
Looking smart always important to her -
Looking now as though she'd just slipped out
To find the cat, feed the birds,
But changed her mind,
Called a cab, caught a train
All the way to Cardiff.

March 2003

The house rocks, creaks,
a wild wind tearing at the tiles.
At the field's end, Crack Willows spread
contorted boughs upwards, outwards,
kneading a sky of dough.
Perched on the hedge, a black crow,
grimly facing the wind and the west,
holds his pose like the carved prow
of an ancient ship.
Sheep huddle behind the hedge
sheltering, heads down.
Undeflected, the crow still faces west.
The proverbial prophet of doom
has turned his back on the East
and the storms brewing there.

A Meeting

"I've told you once already -
At the Brixton Centre for the Handicapped -
That's me!" and she gave a nudge
To indicate complicity -
"I work there, in the laundry" -
And she made some ironing movements
With her hands, to help my understanding
(She clearly thought it needed help!)

"I've got thirteen certificates for swimming,"
Was her next remark -
Only I might have missed that too -
Her speech being thick, and me being hard of hearing.
Except she illustrated her meaning,
Tactfully again, with appropriate movements -
"Up to Streatham, every Thursday evening."

She told me, too, she was engaged -
"Nine months, now" - only that might have meant
The crowded corridor in which we sat -
"WHILE ALTERATIONS ARE IN PROGRESS"
She pointed out.

She helped the harassed dental nurse
To organise her improvised waiting room,
And reassured her that her decision
That relatives should wait outside
Was certainly the best.
(The nurse was not impressed.)

That she was handicapped was self-confessed -
A palate cleft like hers makes conversation difficult -
Yet she was talkative and self-possessed,
And if I try to call to mind the other people there,
I can't remember any of the rest.

Backgrounds 1979

South London Train

She wasn't old. Thirty something isn't old
To be a wino
And that's what she was.
Her dog knew.
Patient, embarrassed, he sat on the train seat
With his head on the seat's back,
Facing the open carriage -
And observed her captive audience.

We listened as she gave us the story of her life.
You knew her dog had heard it all before
And watched only out of interest
At our reaction.

At the end of her recital
He didn't stir as we shuffled uncomfortably.
Two girls giggled and he eyed them
Reproachfully.

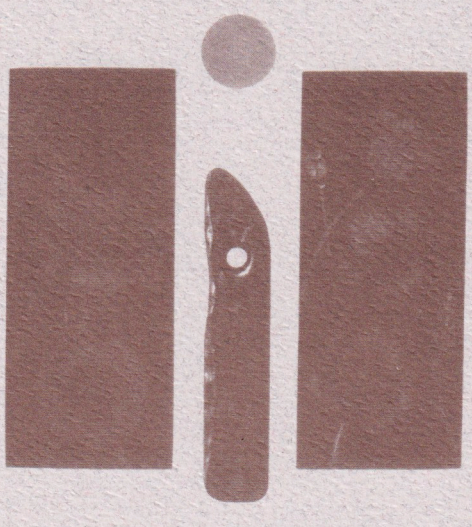
"You'll have to forgive me"
- We hadn't assumed otherwise -
"I always give all my business away
When I drink too much." And she took another drink
From a bottle in a plastic bag.
"He knows," she said, nodding at her dog,
"He's heard it all before." He turned his head
And eyed her thoughtfully. He knew all right.
This was just her matinee performance.
He looked as though he wondered
How she would be – and where – at midnight.

Two Moons 1991

John Keats proclaimed upon a Grecian Urn
That all we know, on Earth,
And all we need to know, is the simple law
That Truth is Beauty, Beauty, Truth,
And thereby set a limit on our prying
Into the mysteries of the universe,
Or metaphysical questions of a life beyond.

Yet, Faustus-like, we strive for a knowledge
Limitless as an Infinity we cannot comprehend,
Awed, the more we learn, to plumb the depths
Of what we do not know.
And our ignorance still yawns before us,
A Jonah's whale, to swallow us down
And spew us out, once more, a question mark.

Backgrounds 1979



Francis

"Come on, who can sing?"
Cried the young nurses, eager for a response
From women withdrawn long ago from a world
Out of harmony with their understanding.
Depressives, psychotics, schizophrenics
- Labels don't mean a thing -
Each in her turn wrapped herself more tightly inwards
As her name was called. Then
"Francis? Can you sing, Francis?"
Francis' face unscrewed slowly, her head
Nodding in response to a half-remembered thought.
"Come on then, sing for us, Francis"
- Gently said and coaxing -
And unbelievably, miraculously, Francis sang.
"Love is the sweetest thing"
Were the words that came in a voice
So enchantingly sweet, the nurses held their breath.
She bewitched them for a whole verse long and then
Just as abruptly her face restored its grimace,
And all their coaxing, all their youthful charm
Couldn't make Francis sing her song again.

A Dark Side of the Sun 1985

Sammy talks to trees, walls, cars and to himself.
He talks to people too. But oh, the change.

When he discourses with inanimate things
Sammy becomes an actor of the old school
Enriching what he silently says
With mime. A Prospero plucking at magic garments
He grandly gesticulates, invoking gods, the wind
And passing clouds, globally inclusive
In his private charades.

In conversations with himself, he roars out loud
And punctuates his speech with thunderous exclamations
Alarming strangers passing by, who cross the road
To avoid a Sammy oblivious even of their presence.

But when you meet him in the street,
Recall him to the here and now, Prospero's
Banished.
Sammy ducks his head obsequiously,
Touches his forelock and bares brown teeth
In a fawning old dog's grin, the eloquence
Of cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces reduced to
"Have you got a cigarette, please?"

Two Moons 1991

Evan ....

Time was that when you walked away from me
Nothing had changed with us when you walked back.

At twenty you left more resolutely;
When you returned, hardly bothered to unpack.

You left me like a well-read book, a piece
Torn out and now read seldom, I'm afraid.
But that's OK – I only had a lease
On a devotion always meant to fade.

You try when you come home to fill the space
You occupied before. It's hard – so much
Of you exists elsewhere, some other place,
And we are out of practice, out of touch.

Maybe one day the empty place in me
Will shrink, and echoes of a time that's gone
Eased out, rather more comfortably
Accommodate the man who's now my son.

Soft Ground Hard Ground 1989

New York Scene

The bus on Madison was full.
In Central Park an Indian Summer sun
Had dazzled.
But here, winter cast its shadow
On urban canyons and the buildings streamed
As though it rained.

"Wait a minute, will ya!
I'm not as young as I look ya know!"
The driver, impervious as Buddha
Stared straight ahead.

Shedding fat and perspiration on seated passengers
She fastened her gaze on a peaked cap near her.
"How old d'ya say I was?"
The peaked cap looked up.
"I'm sixty four, ya know!"
Gamely he rose to the occasion, but kept his seat
"Never! Fifty four!"

And they began a kind of auctioneer's game
Where he would add and she would drop
A year or two.
"Fifty nine? Ok, I'll settle for that.
My boss wouldn't. Jeez, that guy!"
And she spat five years away with a single gesture.

"Ok, let me off will ya!"
And she lurched for the tape to stop the bus.

She floundered off, and a shaft of light from 82nd Street
Fell briefly on the driver's seat:
An ebony obelisk
Not of our time or place.

Two Moons 1991

My Xanadu

I think that I loved San Francisco best.
Old houses that have stood the test
Of time and changing fashion
With high-rise condominiums rest
As easily as Orient meets the West
In glittering Chinatown.

In Fisherman's Wharf seals honk, gulls soar
Or swoop for scraps while calling for more -
Practised professionals all.
For they've seen tourists come and go
And been through this routine before
While touting for their haul.

Ferns in Muir Woods girdle redwood and pine.
Lichen softens the contours of a vine.
Last night as Oaklands West passed by
I saw policewomen by the station sign,
Pistol and night-stick distorting the line
Of female hip and thigh.

Exotic birds in Polk Street preen and prance
Aiming in their sexual ambivalence
To confuse those passing by.
On Union Square, a young man in a trance
Of misery a heroin needle won't lance
Just waits to die.

I'm told when suicides leap from Golden Gate
They choose the Bay side for a last sight
Of the city before they go.
It's a gesture I appreciate –
To turn their back on a life they hate,
But not on San Francisco.

Impressions 1984

Lil

I've seen them twice now in that waiting room,
Just drifting in and out of our experience,
Oblivious of the patients sitting there
Concerned with problems of our own ill-health.
A white stick that he waves from side to side
Proclaims his stigma to a seeing world
While hers might pass for harmless eccentricity
Since vacancy attracts no notice to itself.
Except his constant ringing cries of
"All right, Lil?"
Would raise an interest in the dead
If they were even slightly more alive than we.
At both those visits to that sanctuary
For "Mr Parson's E.N.T. Department"
I've heard that litany begin and end
Their slow procession:
"All right, Lil?"

And all the waiting patients watching
That lost figure in her baggy coat
A jumble-sale hat of rose pink net
Set gamely on her head, and stockings
Like concertinas over her shuffling slippers
Know deep inside their own embarrassment
When the same ringing question comes again
Between the insistent taps of his white stick,
"All right, Lil?"

That Lil in no way is all right, and none
To guide her in our National Health Service
Except a blind man with a waving stick
Who calls like a muezzin to her darkness,
"All right, Lil?"

Windows 1977

Brookside

The old ones sit with the old ones, indifferent
To each other. Silent lips talking of
Times gone by to people who died
Long before.

White haired women watching, waiting,
Note each other's passing. A stopped watch
A clock out of sight irrationally
Disturbing.

They are governed by no moon now. Their sun's
Setting is mortally near – a rounding
Off they wish for but fear. Not death, you see,
Just the dying.

Two Moons 1991

A Kind of Sacrilege

"What do you think?"
What could I say?
A topiarist, not a hairdresser, he should have been!
My daughter's crowning glory - long black curls
Exuberant as her Celtic heritage
That fancy stylist with a vandal's urge
Had pruned perversely like a privet hedge.

I had an image of waist-long silken hair
Gold, like a field of newly-ripened corn.
Would that unthinking harvester
Have reaped hers too,
And proudly called the stubble his new creation?

Soft Ground Hard Ground *1989*

Woman's Own Story

"You're a very fine swan, indeed!" said the ducks,
And many a girl
Despairing at what her mirror showed her
Hoped, someday,
For that magic metamorphosis,
And waiting, waiting,
Missed her true vocation
To be a well-adjusted duck.

Rhymes for our Times 1979

In my Welsh childhood, we would sing with Hywl –
Pianissimo was a foreign word, indeed,
A discipline our teacher would impose on us.
And every practice we'd oblige,
And sing Pianissimo, at her command.
And every concert, crammed on the tiny stage,
In the gym that was our Albert Hall,
We'd try to ignore our teacher's frantic signs
To lower our voices at the quiet bits,
Forget her saying that someone's death
Was not occasion to rejoice.

Maybe the starkness of our Rhondda tips,
And the coal's black dust in all our homes
Was what we were forgetting when we sang.
For might as well tell songbirds in a cage
To lower their voices, sing a song that's sad.
For us, the sign to stand and sing
Was like an invitation to a feast –
And boy, we made a meal of all that music.

Backgrounds 1979

Oh to be a Grandma now that Autumns Here!

How grand and motherly a thing it is
To hold new babies now.
How sweet and fresh the memories return
All carefully selective.
"A la Recherche du Temps Perdu"
Unsullied with soiled napkins.
The ache for the vulnerable newborn child
Who'll give me no nightmares
When I am achingly vulnerable.
Forget the times my babies,
Unwilling to recognise the status quo
For wakefulness and sleeping
Alone in all the world, it seemed sometimes,
Loudly exerted their rights
To be awake from two till five a.m.
And then, once fed,
To sleep till noon.

Soft Ground Hard Ground 1989

"At the going down of the sun, and in the morning..."

Amongst the dead in Flanders' fields
in spite of War's intrusion
Poppies grew in all that mess
in blood-red profusion.
And the generations left behind
chose the poppy as a token,
A symbol of hope that lives
-a promise unspoken.
And November the eleventh of every year
was the day that was chosen
To preserve, for two minutes, everywhere,
a silence unbroken.
And to ease the national conscience, a fine
fiction was engendered
That at dawn and dusk of every day
those dead would be remembered.

Words and Prints 1975

A Philosophy for my family

The dead are dead, then let them be.
Conjure for me no wandering spirit
To titillate my idle curiosity.
I live, and my business is with the living.
Let me experience this part of my existence
In the pattern of infinity,
Take joy in sharing life
With living things,
Live, not just wait between the twin gates
Of my existence here.
And if, when the gate behind me closes,
I find another life beyond for me to live
Then that will be another life
And not a death for those I left behind to mourn.
Or say an endless sleep shall be my second state
Why, no one weeps at each day's end
When I bid all, "Good-night".

Windows 1977

Creative Constipation

Ideas push through to the surface of my mind
With the latent force of a plant in spring.
But the strength of both lies in the ripeness of the time,
And I can no more command ideas to come
Than I can make a cactus flower every day.

Windows 1977

Postscript for my Children

Pick me a bunch of roses when I'm gone
And make me a passing altar on your windowsill
If you would mark the anniversary of my birth
Or death.
For there is nothing sadder than the wilting flowers
On tombs inscribed with "Here lies X"
With, underneath, the dates of birth and death
And sometimes jingles borrowed from greetings cards.
I'll need no stone reminder that I've lived,
For I will live in you in ways
More subtle than the empty record on an empty grave.

Soft Ground Hard Ground 1989

Magnus

His nose being level with a man's crotch, the canine bonding of our enormous Ridgeback was predictably embarrassing. His ploy with women was to goose them from behind. Since we had never succeeded in controlling these impulses, we tended to shut him away until our guests were safely seated. Dog books offer little help on this subject.

In any case, Magnus didn't consider advice given in dog-books had anything remotely to do with him. "A Rhodesian Ridgeback can take any weather and go twenty four hours without water," the book claims. Being a dog whose ancestors came from South Africa, he understandably disliked cold weather, but he didn't stand the heat very well either, and he loathed getting wet. He was miserable in heavy rain, thought paddling in streams overrated, and once when he slipped off a wall into the river, total panic overtook him. I was afraid he would drown and he was certain of it. We risked complete immersion ourselves, getting him out.

"Ridgebacks are the Houdinis of the canine world," the dog-book further declares, advocating high fences. Providently we had ours raised from five feet to six all round our rather large garden - an exercise as superfluous as it was expensive. Magnus was the most earth-bound dog we've ever had! He was a big dog, even for a Ridgeback, but he balked at even a three-foot stile and was too big to squeeze through the dog gate sometimes helpfully incorporated in them. We noticed however, that he was suddenly transformed into Pegasus if offered a biscuit and he was trapped behind a sofa.

One point on which the book is absolutely correct is that the Ridgeback is a hardhead, suffering more than most dogs from that convenient canine deafness that afflicts them at inconvenient times. He would comply with a demand if he considered it reasonable but on the whole preferred decisions jointly made. You would never get him for instance to jump through a burning hoop. With Magnus it was a case of, give him an order and he would give it his earnest consideration. He accepted he was not allowed on furniture, but if really interesting company were present he expected to be part of it and sat his enormous backside next to a favoured visitor. The fact that his feet were still on the floor even if his rear was taking up much of the chair or sofa seemed to him a reasonable accommodation.

He got on well with cats and with other dogs, and although not raised with sheep, adapted to living in an area where it is hard to avoid them. He expected sheep to give way, however, as a mark of respect and was prepared to "spook" any of the bolder sort who stood their ground. After he had scattered them with no more than a quick dart in their direction, he would turn aside with a palpable smirk of satisfaction.

Magnus took his guarding duties seriously and sensibly, but he looked and sounded so formidable we avoided unnecessary introductions with casual callers. One regular tradesman, however, with a self-confessed fear of dogs, liked reassurance that "the dog" was safely indoors when he called. One stormy October day, his head bent against the driving rain, he made his way confidently up our drive secure in the knowledge that "the dog" would not be out in such weather. I was stooping to pick up leaves in the car-port and my rising to meet him unhappily coincided with Magnus' loud reaction as the man passed the window where our trusty porter had probably stationed himself as soon as he heard the van arrive. "Oh my God!" cried the poor man, "Oh Christ!". But before he called on any further divine aid, he realised that my sudden appearance and Magnus' fierce barking were not connected. "Oh God," he blurted out, "I thought you was the dog". And then, in a manly attempt at humour, considering he was still trembling, he looked down at himself, clad head to foot in yellow oilskins, and added, "I mean, he could have mistaken me for a b... b...bloody banana!"

Cab Drivers: Spring 1983

In New York, a cab driver of Italian extraction, a family man concerned for his daughters amid the violence of our times, poured out his unease to me about crime figures, the disappearance of the old values, the loss of respect for basic decency. And lost his way.

In Washington, my endearing fat black driver and I fell demonstrably into that category of two people separated by a common language. Confused by my Welsh accent he decided that I came from Dallas and kept pointing out to me places of interest where famous people had been shot. He finally set me down at the wrong building in the wrong street, with a bag full of books, and avenues that stretched like prairies around me.

In Chicago, my Polish cab driver couldn't tell north from south. Clutching my street map after I had directed him to North State Street, I knew that unless Lake Michigan had got up and crossed the road overnight, we were heading south. But my driver hadn't observed such a sophisticated geographical detail, and banging his head on his wheel in penance may have made me concerned for his head but it didn't make me early for my appointment. That London cab driver who actually didn't know where Bleeding Heart Yard was, "Come back – all is forgiven."

Impressions 1984

My father was a keen gardener, and all through the war years and during the food shortages afterwards he kept chickens.

His allotment lay at the back of our house – a plot of sooty, bramble-infested ground below the railway embankment. All his leisure time was devoted to painting, repairing, extending and generally improving that terraced house, which first my parents rented, and later owned and cultivating his allotment. He grew vegetables, soft fruit and even flowers in that unlikely soil, and when the opportunity came, he acquired the allotment adjacent to ours. The chickens which had blighted our tiny back garden were moved to this new ground, which they duly converted into a murky desert.

Their numbers increased - and so did my father's ambitions as a poultry keeper. He exchanged hens' eggs for ducks', and even persuaded one old matriarch of a hen to accept a goose egg. She hatched out a neurotic gander, called George, whose identity complex plagued him all his short life.

Once when I was helping to pluck the chickens we sold at Christmas, I complained about the mess and smell. My father said quietly, as he pulled out some evil-smelling entrails, "Oh I don't mind this. It's the killing of them I can't stand." But he cared for and killed his chickens all those years because that was the way of it.

Five Flowers for My Father, 1990

Cider

She was your typical beagle, friendly, laid-back, devil-may-care, but with rather more than a Beagle's normal interest in food. Having been the runt of the litter, she was wholly and always convinced that food was about to go off the menu.

All her life she was an incorrigible thief, dustbin scavenger ... and escape artist. No neighbour's dustbin or open kitchen door was safe from her predatory incursions, and we were constantly crawling with apologies for her behaviour.

For seven of the fourteen years of her life we lived in a modern town house with a kitchen opening onto a small patio flanked with seven foot high walls. A gate set into an equally high fence led to communal gardens surrounded by identical patios similarly fenced off. The difference between our fence and the attractive white woodwork of our neighbours' was that ours bore more than a passing resemblance to a cage designed to incarcerate a Barbary ape. But still Cider escaped, mostly by tunnelling out with all the ingenuity and determination of a Colditz escapee. Her aim was to get into all those patios not wired or booby-trapped and through any kitchen door left invitingly open. She was seen all too frequently making off with a string of sausages, or a carton of yoghurt rammed on her nose, its raspberry or banana flavoured drips leading back to base. She once, we were told, rose from nowhere, like Jaws surfacing from the ocean, to intercept a rasher of bacon being transferred from pan to plate, leaving the disbelieving cook with an empty fork in his hand.

She could open a fridge door with her nose, operate a pedal bin with her paw and ingest, in passing, any food remotely within reach. On one occasion two dozen cocktail sausages disappeared off a party table, leaving as many cocktail sticks on an empty plate in just the time it took to answer the doorbell. One Christmas she returned from yet another unlicensed foray, with a grossly distended stomach, and lay digesting its contents for almost a day, giving every anti-social indication that the process was far from easy. By this time we had moved to a detached house with a large garden and were grateful for the greater anonymity these features afforded because we thought Cider looked suspiciously like a stuffed turkey and wondered guiltily if someone's festive table lacked that particular feature of Christmas fare.

The children of course adored her. She was philosophic about being pushed around in an old doll's pram, dressed appropriately in bonnet and shawl, or street-cool posing in shades and slouch hat. Her jealousy of any fluffy toy animal she tore apart didn't distress children who had outgrown their dependency on a particular favourite. They were more of an age to hoot hilariously at her Beagle tendency to roll in whatever vile smell she could find, be it cow pat or dead fish.

Her ending was mercifully quick, raiding a food bin only hours before being put to sleep for an inoperable cancer over which she had shown no previous distress. And in spite of the headaches she'd given us, we waved no flag when she died.

Translations

There occurs in the writings of Bede, an analogy between the passage of human life and that of a sparrow flying into the great hall where thanes feast, the fire is burning and the hall is warm. While he is inside the sparrow is sheltered from the storms. But in no time at all he passes from winter to winter. So does a human life exist for just a moment of time; what goes before and what follows after, we do not know.

The rest is silence, was the postscript Shakespeare added, eight centuries later.

Anglo-Saxon life was harsh and bleak and their society alien to us now, but the poetry that survives has a sad beauty that still appeals and the noble resignation, the conviction that honour and loyalty are codes to live by, that heroism deserves recognition, and refusal to yield to the forces of evil, a hero's commitment, are part of a creed that exists today.

The passages I have translated are from a brutal age when –

*"**Scop Hwilum Sang**"* - Sometimes a Poet Sang.

*Introduction to **Scop Hwilum Sang** 1983*

Seafarer

Allegiance to a cruel master is the theme of the Old English poem ***Seafarer***. Far from the warmth and security of the mead-hall, the "wave-traveller" tells of the relentless lure of the sea, and the hardship of his self imposed exile on its icy water. Not for him the comfortable life of the landsman; his path is the whale-way, the lone-flier his companion.

That being who fares prosperously on land
knows nothing of how I, careworn,
have passed a winter, an exile on the icy sea,
cut off from kinsmen, hung round with icicles,
the hail flying in showers. I heard nothing there
except the sea resounding, the ice-cold wave,
at times the song of the swan.
I took my delight in the cry of the gannet
and the sound of the curlew, instead of
the laughter of men, in the screaming gull,
instead of the drinking of mead.
There storms beat against the cliffs,
there the tern with icy feathers answered them;
full often the dewy-winged eagle screamed.

That man does not know, the creature
living in luxury, what some of those suffer
who follow furthest, the paths of the wanderer.
And yet my heart even now is restless in my breast:
my mind is with the sea-flood,
over the whale's territory;
it roams far and wide over the face of the earth,
comes to me again, eager and unsatisfied;
the lone-flier screams, irresistably urges the mind
to the whale-way over the ocean tracts.

Scop Hwilum Sang *1983*

Beowulf

The story of *Beowulf* begins when Hrothgar, King of the Danes, built himself a magnificent hall, called Heorot, where he and his retainers lived in joy and festivity until they aroused the envy of Grendel. Of the seed of Cain, this hellish ranger of moor and fen, came at night to Hrothgar's lofty hall and seized thirty of his thanes as they slept, carrying them off to devour them in his lair in the fens. The following night he struck again until soon, the fair hall of Heorot was deserted because men feared to remain there.

For twelve years Grendel harassed the Danish people until Beowulf, a thane of Hygelac, king of the Geats, heard of his ravages and sailed from Sweden, with fourteen warriors to help him. They were well received by Hrothgar who, heartened by Beowulf's accounts of his success with giants and monsters, was reassured by his boast, that as for Grendel, Beowulf would either perform a great deed or die.

At nightfall, Beowulf and his retainers were left to guard the hall. The others slept, but Beowulf watched and waited. "And under the cover of darkness, Grendel came."

A long and terrible fight ensued until finally Beowulf tore off the shoulder and entire arm of Grendel. Fatally wounded, the monster made off for the mere, and the severed arm was nailed to the door of the Hall.

There was great rejoicing in Heorot. The young retainers rode out to trace the monster's flight back to the lake, where the waters boiled with his life-blood. The Hall that night rang with the sounds of applause, music and merriment. And then came Grendel's mother. She descended in fury on Heorot and in revenge slew Aeschere, the King's favourite companion, dragging his body and the blood-encrusted arm of Grendel back to the fens.

Ellorgast 1986

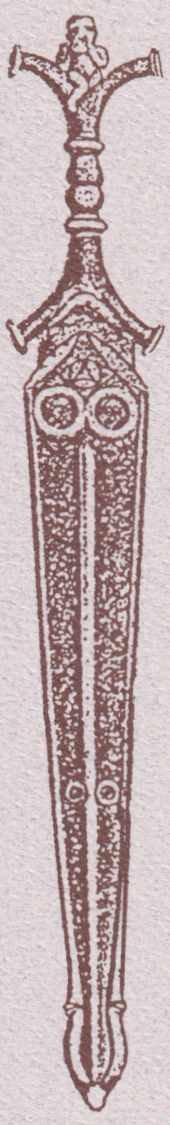
At dawn the, grief-stricken king summoned Beowulf to tell him of the night's events and his fear now –

"I have heard my people say,
men of this country, counsellors in hall,
that they have seen two such alien spirits,
great march-rangers, guardians of the waste lands.
One, as far as they could tell for certain,
was in the likeness of a woman; the other,
though wretchedly shaped, trod the paths of exile
in the form of a man, except that he was bigger
than any living man. Dwellers on earth
in days gone by named him Grendel;
they never knew his father, or whether
he had spawned any benighted fiends before him.
They inhabit unknown country,
wolf-haunted slopes, wind-swept headlands,
dangerous paths through the fens
where the mountain stream plunges down beneath
mist-shrouded rocks, an underground river.
Measured in miles, that place is not far from here,
where the mere lies, overhung with frosty woods;
deep-rooted trees overshadow the water.
There, each night, a baleful portent may be seen:
fire on the flood.
There is no one alive among the children of men
so wise as to know its depth.
Though the moor-stalker, the strong-horned stag,
harassed by the hounds, pursued from afar,
seek the safety of the woods, he will give up his life,
his spirit on the shore, before he will head
into those waters. That is no pleasant place."

Ellorgast *1986*

Llym Awel

Welsh literature has been a continuing experience for fourteen centuries. The earliest poets who composed in Welsh, Taliesin and Aneirin, flourished towards the end of the sixth century.



For over seven hundred years, the background to Welsh poetry was internecine struggle, and warfare against foreign aggressors: the Angles, the Saxons, later the Normans and finally the English. It was a battle which the Welsh could not win; their poets were "...great exponents of the literature of loss."

Early Welsh poetry was essentially political and never cosy. Extolling the virtues of a strong leader, fostering the inner pride of a small nation, turning the glories of the recent past into memorable verse; these were the chief concerns of the bard. His own view of his function was expressed by the poet, Cynddelw to his lord, Rhys ap Gruffydd: "Without me you have no voice; without you I have nothing to say." It is significant that after crushing the revolt which had been led by Llewelyn the Last, one of the many measures Edward I took to try to ensure that Wales would never rise again, was to abolish the office of *Pencerdd*, or chief bard, at the Welsh courts.

Introduction to **Llym Awel** *1994*

About the year 600, Mynyddog Mwynfawr, ruler of the Gododdin, gathered about three hundred noble young warriors at his court of Din Eidyn or Edinburgh, where he feasted them for a year. Mead was the symbol of the hospitality and patronage bestowed by the lord on his "teulu" or war band. Their "talu-medd" or mead payment, was their fidelity.

At the end of the year, Mynyddog sent his elite force to engage the enemy, the invading Angles, at Catraeth, present day Catterick, in Yorkshire. The Britons were hopelessly outnumbered and of the heroic band of three hundred, the poet Aneirin was one of only three who survived. He calls Taliesin to witness that he sang ***Y Gododdin*** "...before the next day dawned."

The social background is of a military aristocracy for whom the accepted morality is courage in war, generosity in peace, a longing for glory and horror of disgrace. ***Y Gododdin*** is therefore not only an elegy but a celebration for the warriors who attained undying fame by their fidelity to their lord, and unyielding courage in the face of overwhelming odds.

What lends poignancy to the traditional heroic framework that supports the poem through well over a thousand lines is the intimacy of the portraits that Aneirin draws of young men he knew personally, eighty of whom he mentions by name. Delivered in a style that is as terse as it is ironic his word pictures are hard to forget, of Madog, "hesitant before a maiden", bold enough in battle; modest Isag, whose "sword resounded in the heads of mothers"; gentle Ceredig. "a lover of songs" and a ferocious fighter.

For all the heroes Aneirin sang,

"Short was their life, long their kinsmen's grief."

Y Gododdin

A man in might, a boy in years,
Courageous in battle;
Swift, long-maned steeds
Under a fine youth's thighs;
A light broad shield
On fast sleek haunches;
Gleaming blue blades
Rimmed with wrought gold.
There shall be no enmity
Between you and me.
Rather I will make for you
Song that will praise you:
More eager for the battlefield
Than a wedding feast,
More ready for a raven's meal
Than a burial,
A dear friend was Owain;
It is wrong he lies beneath a cairn.
Wretched to me the place where
Marro's only son was slain.
Wearing his brooch, he was always in front.
Timid with a girl, yet he earned his mead.

Men rode to Catraeth, swift was their host;
Fresh mead was their meal and it was bitter.
Three hundred fought in the order of battle
And after the exultation there was silence.

Llywarch Hen

Llywarch: *I know in my heart*
That we are of one blood.
Long have you stayed away, O Gwen!

Gwen: *Sharp is my spear, it flashes in battle*
I will prepare to guard the ford.
Though I may not escape, God be with you.

Llywarch: *If you live, I shall see you again.*
If you are killed I will mourn you.
Lose not a warrior's honour in the fight.

Gwen: *I will not lose your honour, battle-eager man,*
When warriors arm for the border.
I will suffer pain before I give ground.

Llywarch: *A wave runs up the beach,*
Its resolution soon ebbs.
He who is quick to boast is often first to flee.

Gwen: *I will keep my word:*
Spears will be broken where I am;
I do not say I will not flee.

Llywarch: *When I was the age of that lad over there*
Wearing those spurs of gold,
Swiftly would I rush to the spear.

Gwen *No doubt what you say is true:*
You are alive and your witness is dead
No old man was a weakling in youth.

Gwen rides out to the ford on the River Llawen and dies defending it. He does more than keep his promise; he measures up to all his father's demands, standing his ground resolutely, without resorting to the tactical retreat he had reserved for himself in, 'I do not say I will not flee.'

Llywarch, left to mourn the last of his sons, faces the reality of his extravagant expectations. His pride in Gwen's heroism is tempered by his sense of loss, but also by self-doubt.

"Gwen I knew your nature:
You were the rush of an eagle upon the estuaries.
Had I been wise, you would have lived."

Llywarch had raised his sons to live and die by the martial ideal that had spurred on the heroes of ***Y Gododdin*** to certain, if glorious, death. Nothing is left of them, and for Llywarch, only uncertainty.

Although, historically, Llywarch Hen belonged to the 'Heroic Age' of Taliesin and Aneirin, almost three centuries of terrible losses separated the poet of *Y Gododdin* and the poet of the ninth century saga of Llywarch. The mood now is not one of unquestioning valour, even in the face of certain defeat. The spirit of the poetry, like the times, has profoundly changed.

In the following passage, the ageing Llywarch, a chieftain of Powys, has been defending his border against the Saxons. He has goaded twenty three sons into battle and one by one they have been killed. Only his youngest son, Gwen, remains; newly arrived from the court of his uncle, in the north, he is at first not recognised by his father until Gwen insists: 'My mother asserts I am your son.'

The meeting takes the form of a dramatic dialogue in which Gwen is acknowledged by his father, then obliquely reproached for not having come sooner to his aid. Stung by Llywarch's suggestions of cowardice, and non-fulfilment of vows, and by allusions to his father's valour as a youth, Gwen is manoeuvred into promising not only to defend the border, but to put himself in the position of greatest risk in order to preserve his father's honour.

Gwen's final ironic comment begs the question: if Llywarch was always – as he claims – in the forefront of battle, how has he survived to old age, while his twenty three sons have been killed?

Shirley Jones: Red Hen Press

Born and brought up in the Rhondda Valley, Shirley Jones studied English Literature at the University of Wales, Cardiff and taught in London for seven years before attending classes in lithography, etching and sculpture. At the age of forty she became a full-time postgraduate student of printmaking at Croydon College of Art and Design, where she published her first two artist's books. Since setting up her own studio in 1977 she has produced a further twenty artist's books, adopting the imprint Red Hen Press in 1983. She returned to Wales permanently in 1994.

Printed by letterpress on handmade or mouldmade paper in editions of forty, each of her books is a total concept, a planned integration of different crafts, involving visual and literary creativity.

"This is a unique press where the owner produces almost single handed, artist's books in which the text consists of her own poems, prose pieces and translations from Old English and Old Welsh. These are illustrated with etchings, aquatints and mezzotints of considerable power and haunting beauty which demonstrates the artist's skill in these very taxing autographic mediums."
"A Nation and its Books" ed. Philip Henry Jones and Eluned Rees 1998.

Her books are bought by private collectors and over fifty major institutions including the British Library; the National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum; the National Library of Wales; the Gutenberg Museum, Germany and the Riksmuseum, Netherlands. The Library of Congress in Washington has a complete collection of her work.

She has exhibited widely, including solo exhibitions at the V & A and the National Library of Wales. She has given public lectures at both these venues, at many of the leading universities and liberal arts colleges in the United States, at the Art Institute, Chicago and the New York Centre for the Book Arts, where two of her books were included in the 1994 exhibition, ***Masters of the Craft.*** In this year her book, ***Llym Awel*** won the British Book Design Award for limited edition books.

Set in Berkley, with images reproduced from the original etchings or mezzotints by Shirley Jones in an edition of 500 signed copies, of which 1-200 are numbered and case-bound.

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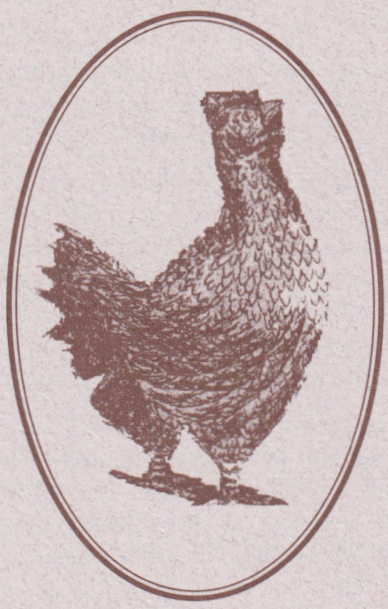

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